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Letters from a Footloose Forester

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Letters from a Footloose Forester

By John Schwartz

Trail Camp,
Sauk, Wash.,
July 14, 1928.

Dear Ken:

Really I'm sorry, old fellow, that you didn't come out here with me this summer. You're missing some wonderful experiences, and a great deal of good fresh mountain air, by hanging around town.

I am located on the Mt. Baker National Forest, in a Forest Service trail camp, twenty-five miles from the nearest town. There are ten men in camp, including the cook. Supplies and mail are brought up once a week by pack train. We are working on a trail project which, when completed, will be ten miles long. The work thus far has been quite enjoyable, and, altho hard, is far from monotonous, as we are continuously moving forward into new and interesting territory. There's not much danger of a sunstroke in this country. The timber is so dense that the sun seldom shines directly on one, and the air is always cool.

Golly! but this is a steep, rough country. If I stay out here long, and climb many of these hills, I'm afraid one leg will become shorter than the other, and they'll be classifying me as a sort of "Side-Hill-Gouger". We are virtually in the heart of the Cascade Mountains, and boy, what high old hills they are. Rising from almost sea level they attain elevations of from 6000 to 10000 feet. The lower slopes and valleys are heavily timbered with Douglas Fir, Hemlock, Cedar, Firs, and other less important species. At 5000 feet there is a gradual thinning out of trees, and 6000 feet is usually considered the timberline. Here the large-growing species of the lower elevation have been replaced by hardy alpine species (Alpine Fir, Mountain Hemlock, Alaska Cedar, and White Bark Pine).

I had some interesting experiences at the ranger station before they finally sent us out to this camp. As I arrived there several days in advance of others of the crew, the ranger put me to work at odd jobs around the station. The morning of the first day I was put at telephone line repair work. Shortly after lunch that same day a severe lightning storm passed over, starting several fires in the district. As a result I climbed my first real mountain in search of one of them.

Next day, I was initiated into the mysteries of throwing a "diamond hitch," and horse-packing in general, then sent

with two horses, to pack supplies to a lookout station seventeen miles away—and it seemed as many miles up. Well, that trip was full of grief. A description of the countless times I repacked those animals, and the language I used, together with the fact that I spent the night half-way up the mountain side-huddled in a driving, cold rain would perhaps be better left unwritten.

Well, Ken, old heart breaker, let me hear from you this summer. Give me a lineup on what you are doing.

Your Pard,

Lang

* * *

Green Mt. Lookout,
Mt. Baker Natl. For.,
Sept. 3, 1928.

Dear Ken:

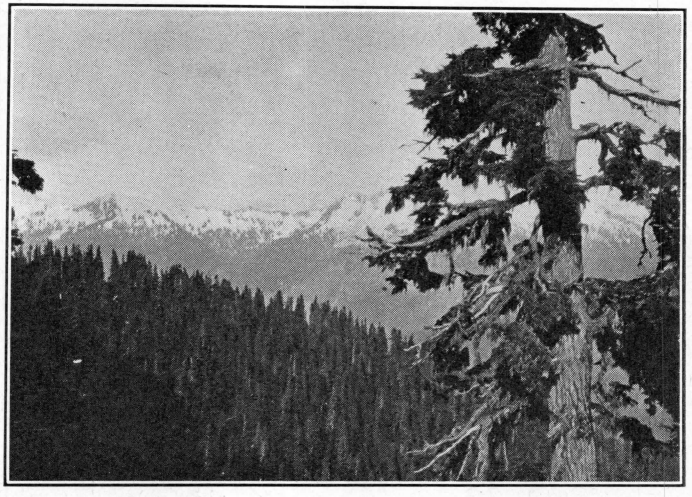
Soon after I wrote to you, in July, I was transferred to this lookout station. I am the second man to try this job. The first stayed only one week, got his fill of lonesomeness and big bears—which are numerous—and then quit.

I've been up here almost two months, now, and have become quite well acquainted with this "elevated" occupation of a fire lookout. The nearest town is thirty-eight miles away. Mail and supplies are brought up every three or four weeks, a telephone is my only means of communication with the outside world. At times, even that fails.

Altogether, I have seen about a dozen people during my stay up here, six of them belonging to a government survey party, two sheepherders, and the rest, Forest Service employees. For the past two weeks I haven't seen a single soul, and boy! it has been lonesome.

As this is a secondary lookout (Green Mountain, Elev., 6000 ft.) there are none of the conveniences and improvements one is accustomed to finding at a primary station. My shelter is a wall tent, pitched a quarter of a mile below the lookout point. The darned thing is so small that I awake each morning to find my feet protruding under the rear wall. I have no stove and my dishes consist of a tin mess-kit, a skillet, and a tin can, in which I make coffee. A nearby snowbank furnishes necessary water.

At the lookout point there is no sort of shelter. It is merely a high rocky peak too small and rough for any practical structure. Here, mounted on a box, is an Osborne Jr. firefinder. With this rather unstable base and small firefinder one would hardly expect very accurate results. They are surprisingly so, tho.



Rugged Country in Northern Washington.

The view from this point is excellent in spite of the fact there are higher peaks roundabout. Ten miles directly east of here is the summit of the Cascade range running almost north and south. Glacier Peak, the most imposing mountain of this locality, looms up, at seemingly my back door. In reality, tho, it is twelve miles to the southeast. It is the fourth highest mountain in the state—an extinct volcano encrused with glaciers.

Snowfall in this region is unusually heavy during the winter months, depths of twenty to thirty feet being not uncommon. Around six thousand feet, one reaches the level of eternal snow. Above this elevation snowbanks linger all summer, and here and there fair sized glaciers are found.

Most of the region here on Green Mountain above the 4500-foot level is composed almost entirely of open alpine meadows. Rare beautiful flowers grow everywhere in abundance. Each summer the Service allows a band of sheep to graze over these meadows. This summer 2200 head were brought up.

There have been just two fires in this district, all season. So you see, I haven't been overworked spotting new ones. A severe lightning storm passed over this region last week, but the heavy rain which followed apparently extinguished all strikes.

Another week shall likely find you back in the traces at school, eh? Wish I were coming back this year. Here's wishing you luck, old boy.

Your Old Pal
Lang

Darrington, Washington,
U. S. G. L. O. Survey
October 12, 1928.

Dear Ken:

Do you remember the government survey party I told of, that was working on Green Mountain this past summer? Well, this fall after I had finished my job with the Forest Service, the chief of this party offered me work with them. Their season lasted two months longer, and as I had no particular hurry to exchange the tall timber for the bright lights of town, I accepted —possibly, the most important reason was that I wanted to become better acquainted with the region. At any rate, I am now the chief operator of a highly simplified instrument generally known as an axe, and my title on the payroll is "Axeman."

The object of this survey (General Land Office) is the subdividing of townships into sections. Because of the fact that this country is so extremely rough and inaccessible it is still practically in a virgin state, and a considerable portion remains to be surveyed and accurately mapped.

The entire party consists of seven men—the chief, the rear chainman, front chainman, axeman, flagman, cook, and the packer. The latter two have no part in the actual survey work, however.

In the field we work as follows: the chief sights the flagman in on a line, at some distance away. He in turn sets a temporary point over which the chief makes his next setup. The axeman, who goes either ahead or behind the instrument man, cuts brush and blazes all trees on or close to the line. And last comes the chainman. The rear chainman takes and records the measurements. He also takes the angle of the tape at each stick and makes necessary corrections—occasionally, the line may ascend or descend as much as three thousand feet in one mile. Due to the general ruggedness and dense plant growth of this region, a mile of line is usually accepted as standard for a day's work.

Believe it or not, Ken, I have lately become acquainted with downright hard work. They call it back-packing out here. It is all that the term implies and a good deal more. Certainly I can appreciate a pack horse's viewpoint now. Much of the country is too rough and inaccessible to work from the main camp. Therefore the most expedient method is to pack in blankets and grub on the back, and camp temporarily in places most convenient to the work.

Well it's time I was hitting the old sleeping-bag. Had a tough day, today, and tomorrow will likely be worse. Drop me a line sometime.

As Ever,
Lang

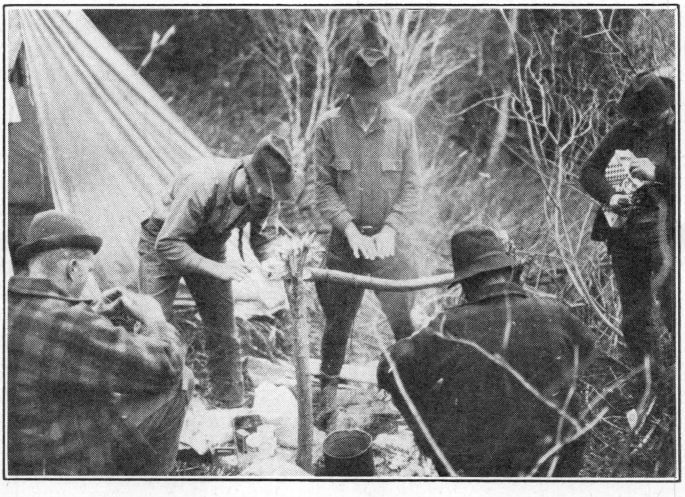
Olympia, Washington.
March 20, 1929.

Dear Ken:

I have found that this Northwest country, besides being a great lumber producing section, is one of the world's greatest rain producing regions. When it isn't rainy, it's foggy, and when it isn't foggy, it's getting ready to rain some more. That's the reason why people out here all become web-footed.

After work on the survey was completed, last fall, I came to this town, and got work in a sawmill, piling and sorting lumber for an inspector—and here I have worked ever since. There's nothing about the job that involves responsibility, to any degree, or even to learn grades and lumber dimensions.

This mill is an averaged sized one, cutting about 400,000 board feet daily. Douglas fir logs, which are used entirely, are brought to the mill in large rafts. Ross carriers are the chief means of transporting the lumber to different sections of the mill yard. Two large cranes are employed chiefly to pile lumber for storage in the yard, and to load flat cars and scows.



A Side Camp.

Enough about the mill for the present. I want to tell you of my recent trip to Paradise Valley, on Mt. Ranier. I had long heard of its splendid possibilities for winter sports, and hoped that I might during my stay here, have an opportunity to enjoy them. Fortunately for me, my hopes were destined to be realized, for last week some friends invited me to accompany them on a trip to this mountain.

We journeyed as far as Longmire Springs by auto. Here the road ended because of the increasing depth of snow, and we were obliged to hike, on snowshoes, the remaining six miles. Arriving at Paradise Inn about noon, we ate dinner, then without wasting more valuable time, rented skiis, and started out for an, all too brief, afternoon of fun. And what a good time we did have—skiing down those long slopes each taking his share of spills, and kidding. The snow was on an average of twenty feet deep.

Spring is almost at hand here, and I'm beginning to feel the old urge, to go back to the big timber, again. Another season in the Cascades appeals very much to me, so I think it will be the U. S. G. L. O. survey, for me again this summer.

An Old Hill-Billy
Lang

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U. S. G. L. O. Survey,
Darrington, Wash.,
Oct. 20, 1929.

Dear Ken:

A great deal has transpired since I last wrote to you. Another season of survey work is behind us and we are making preparations to return to town. Golly! it will seem good to take in a few shows, listen to good music, and eat real food.

Judging from your letter, you had some interesting experiences yourself this summer. So you got treed by a bear, eh? What did you do, try to pet her? So you think the Cascades can't compare with the Rockies? We'll have to argue that out sometime.

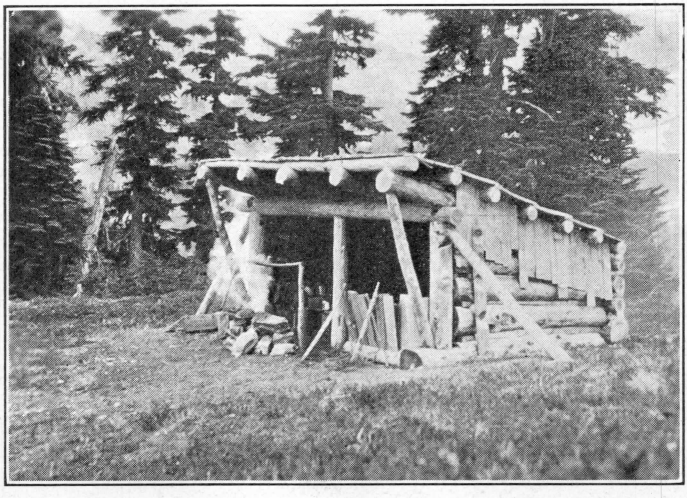
Our work during this past summer was in the township just north of where we were last year. One might think the country would be a good deal the same, but it is often surprising what great differences can occur in six or eight miles of mountainous country. For an example, this year we were in a region of lakes and hot springs, whereas last year lakes occured only occasionally and hot springs not at all.

From time to time, throughout the summer, we were afforded opportunities to observe big game at close range. Deer seemed the most numerous and were usually seen around the timber line. The species of deer inhabiting the west slopes of the Cascades is known as the Columbian Blacktail. The most interesting, and probably the least seen of any of the larger animals, were the mountain goats. To watch them jump from rock to rock and ascend almost perpendicular cliffs with uncanny surefootedness was indeed fascinating. With the ripening of the huckleberries in the high meadows, bears commence to appear.

By fall, when snow begins to fly, they have acquired several inches of fat on their ribs, as well as fine coats of heavy fur. The species common to this region is the black bear with its various phases.

Of the smaller animals, marmots, conies, chipmunks and squirrels are the most frequently seen. Coyotes, foxes, martens, rabbits and other smaller animals inhabit this region but are seldom seen because of their shyness. Grouse and ptarmigan are the principal game birds. Two species of grouse are found, the blue grouse at the higher altitudes and the ruffed grouse in the valleys and river bottoms.

Altho, our work consisted mainly of mountain climbing, all summer, none of us could be content until we had climbed Glacier Peak, the grand old mountain of this region. Towering fully two thousand feet above all neighboring peaks, it seemed to ever extend us a challenge to conquer it. Accordingly, one day, three of us obtained two days leave of absence from work and started out to climb this mountain. The first day was spent journeying to its foot.



At daybreak the second day (August 1st) we started for the summit, six miles away. Soon we came to the edge of White-chuck Glacier, an ice field over two miles long and half as wide. With some caution we picked our way over it, uncertain as to the condition of the ice—due to alternate melting and freezing, glaciers frequently honeycomb late in the summer. However, it proved quite firm, for the most part, and we soon forgot our fears. In an hour we had crossed the glacier and

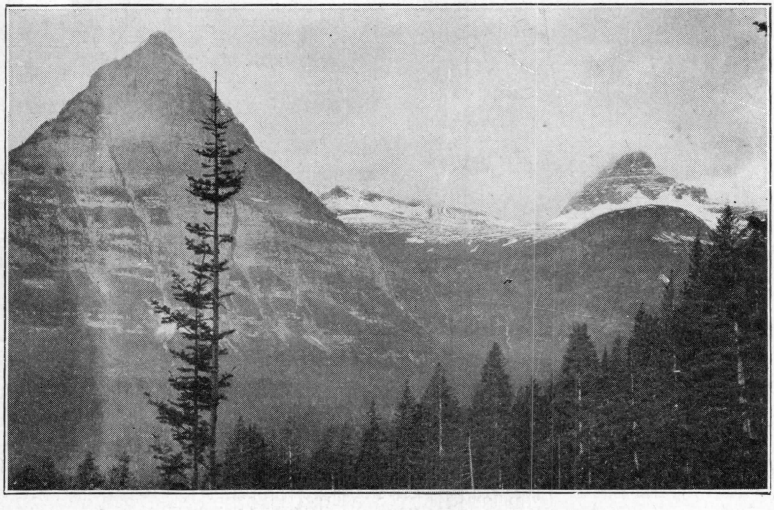
were well on our way up a backbone sort of ridge leading toward the summit. This ridge separated two large glaciers. At length we were forced to cross another glacier. Upon this particular glacier we encountered our first crevasse—a crack in the ice one hundred yards long, ten feet wide, and perhaps hundreds of feet deep. As we continued to go higher, crevasses became more numerous, and for awhile it seemed a process of winding our way in and out between these great cracks. Finally we reached a long cinder ridge which led directly to the summit, now only a few hundred feet above us. Half an hour later we stood on the highest point of Glacier Peak, 10,436 feet above sea level.

The view from here was superb. The entire Cascade Range seemed at our feet, stretching far north into Canada, and south to Mt. Adams, 150 miles away. The three highest peaks, Mt. Ranier, Mt. Adams, and Mt. Baker, were visible. To the west the Olympic Range stood, its lower slopes veiled with the smoke of Puget Sound cities.

We lingered here on this snow-topped summit more than half an hour, resting, eating our lunches, snapping pictures, and affixing our names to the register which was sealed in a brass cylinder. The trip down was made without mishap, and at nine o'clock that night we were back at the survey camp.

I was glad to hear that your seminar talk went over so big. Sorry tho, you're finishing this spring. How about flunking a few subjects, and we'll start back together next fall?

Fraternally,
Lang



Scene in Glacier National Park, Montana.